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Interview with Mrs. B. N. Simrall, Sr.

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This is Mrs. E. R. McKnight from Mississippi interviewing Mrs. B. N. Simrall, Sr. in April 1982, part of the NEHC oral history.

I was married in 1927 in the '27 flood and that's when I really learned to be really a country lady.

You came out here with the flood?

In the midst of the flood. I helped over 300 people that they brought down on a steamboat from around the Yazoo countryside. This was the first dry land and they'd drop off a load and go back. We learned to cook in a small tin tub. We cooked bread in big tall bread pans.

Where did you get all that food?

We happened to have home ground meal, we had lard, we had eggs, we had plenty of milk and we had a garden that was just coming on with cabbage. We had cabbage out of the garden.

How long were they here?

They were here and the storm was brewing. They were wondering what in the world to do and I told Mr. Simrall why didn't he send Mr. Terrell to town. We could go around. So we sent Mr. Terrell to town and told them about it at the Red Cross office and told them they had to have shelter. There was no place to shelter them here. They sent army trucks out and took them into town and they just got there before the storm broke. We didn't have them here for any length of time, just that one day. You used to didn't ring the cans, you didn't cut them, and you used them over. We washed them out clean and dried them so they wouldn't rust. I don't know how many dozens we had. We had enough food in those tin cans to eat out of. I guess they had to eat with their hands.

That would be something to have that many people invade for a meal.

That's when I learned to cook for a crowd.

When did you first organize the club?

It was about 1929. We started up with 12 members and it kept growing and growing.

How did you hear about the work?

The 4-H club leader was in Vicksburg and some ladies got together and asked her to help organize a club. She said she didn't want to fool with women but they organized and she started off with them with different programs. Then we wanted to organize and asked her if she would come help us but she wouldn't really be responsible for us because she had so many 4-H clubs. We used to go help her when she had camp.

Did you have cabins?

Cabin with tin over the top. It was pretty hot inside.

Did the whole family go or just the women?

Just the mothers. We taught something. We'd weave baskets out of honeysuckle vines and make wooden baskets.

Did all the clubs go there and camp out at one time or was this just your club?

All of them. I imagine there was only about three at that time. Each group just kept growing. We'd have a countywide camp out. That many of us would have three days at state college. We'd go once year to State College. That was when we had our state meeting there.

I've heard a lot about the camps. Everybody had such a good time.

We did. We just felt free and each club would put on some kind of skit or something. Maybe somebody had a specialty of knowing how to do something like preparing a meal like a hot tamale pie and they would prepare that.

You carried the food from home?

No, we were asked to bring all things we had to have, chicken and some baked goods of some kind and then if you had fresh corn from the garden or peas or anything that you had plenty of we would always take what we had.

That sounds like it would have been fun.

It was fun. It was so many of us and would say this is so much better, thinking about what we would have for dinner.

In your early club meetings, what sort of learning sessions did you have? What did you join the club to learn particularly?

I really joined the club to learn everything that I could. When we first started out it was food preservation and we were taught how to preserve, can. Each woman would bring her extra vegetables from the garden and can it and send it to the Old Ladies Home in Jackson. We canned meat. We had a lot of corn, but of course we had some help on the place. That was the hardest thing you had to put up. It was more apt to spoil than anything. We would mostly put it up with an acid vegetable or a soup mixture.

At this time you canned in tin cans rather than glass jars, didn't you?

Yes, we had to have a solder, you had to solder them to seal them.

When you soldered, was that a hand thing?

It was a hot solder iron used to solder the top on just like you would solder anything. That was quite hard to do.

That would be a tricky method of canning. I was reading in connection with the camps one lady wondered how she could keep the moths out of her wool bathing suit and somebody told her to can it. Put it in a jar and can it to keep the moths out.

We sent our boys in the army canned pecans and goodies in cans.

So you could just preserve a whole lot of things.

Weren't you one of the charter members of the Redwood Club? And I believe I read, too, that you were the first president of the county council.

Yes. That was when we had just about three clubs then.

Where did you meet for your council meeting.

The old Post Office building we had. It was just an afternoon meeting.

Do you remember the first agent that you had in the county? I believe she was Avangie Hawkins.

Yes.

She said she made \$60 a month.

I don't know her salary. I believe she had more to do with the girls than she did with the ladies.

Do you remember the Better Homes weeks that you used to have?

Yes, we had Better Homes weeks. We had picnics and we always had a good speaker, somebody that was interested. We had fairs to show our club crafts then the state fair we participated in.

You helped with the 4-H's too didn't you?

Yes, we helped with their markets.

Was this a Saturday market that the 4-H's had?

We first started with a Saturday market then it was throughout the summer. We built a market.

After you went to the fairs, you also served meals, the council did, didn't they?

Yes, when we had a fair we would serve the dinner to the different civic groups like Rotary, Kiwanis, Lions Clubs. We would have the vegetable shows, flower shows and I'm proud to say I was the state winner of _____ one year and I won a jar of green beans.

You met down here at the school a good bit for your canning, didn't you?
Yes, we had dozens of cans. I can't remember how many now. We met down there for several years when the canner was brought there.

Did you cook inside or was this over an outdoor fire?

We had to go in the hot building. There was no screening and it wasn't very comfortable, I tell you, but we made it.

It was work by today's standards, by many means.

I read too that you had a time homes over the county.

Yes, everybody had a project there. They'd have the garden club contest and they'd go around the county inspecting the gardens.

Tell us about the name for your home.

Our home is really a historic name. It's not my own name. It's supposed to be original playground for the Indians. It was a ball ground. They all played a certain type of ball game and they would gather here for miles around, they said. It's quite a few Indian mounds around here. So they called it Ball Ground.

Do you remember any of the other names that any of the other people had?

I think Miss Marsh called her Glad Acres and Miss Bessie called hers what?
I can't remember the other names.

But surely that showed a little extra pride in their home.

Everybody put up a nice mailbox with the name on it and were supposed to have flowers around it. It was a beautification project.

As you were growing up did you have to participate and help with the housework?

I had a mother that really taught you to work. If you didn't do the job right you had to do it over. My mother was a wonderful housekeeper and she taught her help how to cook.

So even though you had help in the home most of the time you still had to know how to do it?

Yes, you had to supervise it. It was much cooler outside. It wasn't as easy as we have it now.

You wouldn't want to go back to the good old days?

No, I wouldn't want to go back to the good old days even though I have seen the peach trees and the fruit trees we had just hanging with their beautiful fruit we used to have and I just miss that terribly. It doesn't seem we can have fruit like that now.

Most of the homes grew their own fruit too didn't they?

Yes, we grew most of the food we ate. I used to take pride in telling people that what they had on the table was grown on the place because we ground our own meal.

I suppose it's been just in the past few years that you have bought because you've always had a garden.

I take pride in gardening. I've been a homemaker member 53 years since 1929.

What would you say would be your biggest satisfaction from being a homemaker club member. I know you've enjoyed it to have been a member that many years.

I think the most I have gotten out of it is my trip to the national convention. I was real pleased to have the opportunity to go and I went to Massachusetts. What I got out of there was to sit there with about 5,000 women in an auditorium and to list to Edgar Guest repeat his poems and the last thing he said was it takes a lot of women for a place to _____. That was really the highlight of that trip. We went to Mammoth Caves and went to Detroit and up to Montreal and back. We were gone about three weeks.

During all these years I know you've seen a lot of changes in the world about you in people, social changes.

Young people have gardens but they don't take it seriously.

Do you still have gardens here on the place?

Yes, we got a head of lettuce today. We've had spinach.

Is there anything about the homemaker club that did not fulfill your expectations or has it been everything you wanted it to be to you?

I can say yes because I've had so many of the people in the county attend the fairs and the recreation together is what I've really enjoyed. I feel like I have really enjoyed it. I'm 87 years old and I really still enjoy my meetings. We have them the third Wednesday of every month. I get just as much pleasure out of them as I did at first.

So it's not just altogether educational. Everybody enjoys the social part too. Everybody I have talked to say that the friends they have made through their homemaker organizations have been one of their biggest things to them.

Yes. I used to like the competition. We used to try to get more blue ribbons than the next fellow and that made us work harder.

Since we've done away with so many county fairs that's done away with a lot of the competition and a lot of contact with the other members over the county I think.

Even going to State College every year, many of the ladies don't attend every year like they did. I haven't been to state council for a good many years. The husbands used to go. My husband went twice with me. They had a program planned for the men. He enjoyed it as much as I did. Our club put on a play for the men once at state meeting.

Did you write your own play too?

No, I don't remember. I wasn't a member of the group that did it. But they did go to Memphis. They were invited to Memphis to put it on.

There have been a lot of good changes and a lot of bad changes.

I don't think people enjoy themselves like we used to. They don't get as much out of life as we did.

At the time this club was organized probably your homemakers club and your church were your main activities outside the home.

Right. We didn't have a church here where we live so several families got together and started one and it just kept growing and growing. We didn't have TV and we didn't run to the store everytime you had to get something. You had to use what you had at home. We didn't have roads then like we do now. We first had a gravel road.

When the homemaker club first organized, how did the agent come to the club meeting?

They would come to every meeting. We would have a demonstration at the meetings and we would send a representative to the office to tell her the project and she would come to the meeting and put on the demonstration. Of course after so many years the agent quit coming and we had to do it on our own.

That helped to develop some leadership in the club instead of depending on the agent to do it.

About this time when your club was organized, were cars popular. Did your agent have a car?

Yes, she had her car. We had several cars at our club and we would pick up one another.

If you were talking to a young homemaker today, do you think the homemaker club has anything to offer? Why would you tell her she should join?

I would tell her to join because she could learn if she didn't know anything about it she could learn a whole lot. I think it's important to have a homemaker club still. There are so many things that I have learned through the years but the younger generation has not. The young women now are the ones who should be learning these things. Of course we have some wonderful girls clubs that have taught a lot.

Then, too, we went through a period when everybody didn't have a garden. They weren't interested in canning. Now it's sort of revived again. Everybody's planting a garden so interest in canning has renewed. Competition used to encourage you to want to learn. One member down here has a lot of ribbons. You couldn't count them. Didn't she make a quilt out of them? I think I heard that.

Yes. It makes you ashamed of yourself that you didn't do better.

If the council president or somebody were to ask you what we could do to the clubs to improve them, what they could offer to make it any better, would you have any suggestions?

It would be hard to tell now I've been through so many project and so many other things. I wouldn't know just what to tell them. Just continue what they're doing. You can't really eliminate anything.

Your group seems to grow so you must be having some interesting programs and there must be something there to appeal to everybody.

It seems like since we've been meeting in the homes the ladies leave with so much more than when we met at the school. You were proud to show off what you had learned when they met in your home.